

The Open Access Stories - Richard Poynder, Reporter of the OA Movement



Today we welcome Richard Poynder to [The Open Access Stories](https://blog.scholasticahq.com/post/the-open-access-stories-celebratingoa-week-2015/) (<https://blog.scholasticahq.com/post/the-open-access-stories-celebratingoa-week-2015/>) blog series! Share this story and your own on Twitter by using the hashtag - [#MyOAStory](https://twitter.com/search?q=%23MyOAStory&src=typd) (<https://twitter.com/search?q=%23MyOAStory&src=typd>).

[Richard Poynder](http://richardpoynder.co.uk/about.html) (<http://richardpoynder.co.uk/about.html>) is an independent journalist and blogger specializing in information technology, scholarly communication, professional online database services, open science, eScience, and intellectual property. He takes a particular interest in the Open Access Movement, which he has been following the development of for more than a decade.

My OA Story: Q&A with Richard Poynder

At what point in your career did you begin to write about the Open Access Movement and what spurred your interest? What is your goal in covering OA related topics?

RP: I am not sure I have ever had a career; it's been more a series of incarnations. These have included a period in the Royal Navy, and spells as a farm worker, a railway guard, a school teacher, and a journalist/blogger. I reinvented myself as a journalist in the 1980s, initially writing on technology for the Financial Times and other UK newspapers, plus doing occasional features for the Wall Street Journal Europe.

During that period, I was also working as the editor of Information World Review (IWR), which reported on the “online information industry”. Online information at that time implied something rather different than what we understand the term to mean today, consisting as it did primarily of online hosts like Dialog, DataStar, LexisNexis, and STN International. These sold access to a mix of business, legal, chemical, patent and trademark information over very expensive proprietary dial up systems. While I was at IWR the controversy on whether genes should be patentable was at its height, as was the debate over whether software and so-called “business method” patents should be permitted. Since I was frequently writing about patent information I found myself immersed in the issues around software patents. In doing so, I bumped into the open source software movement, and thence to the other free and open movements, including open access. I was intrigued at the way in which technological developments were challenging traditional proprietary ways of doing things, and so set out to explore this in more depth through a series of interviews with protagonists from the various free and open movements. These were published online as

The Basement Interviews

(<http://richardpoynder.co.uk/The%20Basement%20Interviews.htm>) in 2006.

After doing those interviews I concluded that open access was being underreported relative to, say, free and open source software, and so decided to focus on that. As to my goal: Stevan Harnad (<https://blog.scholasticahq.com/post/the-open-access-stories-stevanharnad-oa-pioneer/>) once described me as the “chronicler, conscience, and gadfly laureate” of the open access movement. That somewhat oversells my contribution, but I am happy to be thus described, not least because it gets that my aim is not simply to report on open access, but to record its development over time, and to try to explore the issues it raises in some depth. And as I am not a researcher, a librarian or a publisher I like to think that I have a slightly more independent perspective than those who are actors in the OA drama.

What steps do you think academics should be taking to further OA discussions? What are some of the best examples of OA advocacy in your opinion, and do you think enough people are focusing on OA?

RP: To take the second question first: I suspect that some of the best advocacy efforts take place in private, and so are not visible to the rest of the world. I am told, for instance, that Stuart Shieber spent many long hours persuading his colleagues (often on a one-to-one basis) of the merits of voting for the first Harvard open access policy – the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) Open Access Policy

(<http://harvardmagazine.com/2008/05/open-access.html>), which was passed in 2008. The FAS policy was one of the more significant developments in the open access movement. As Peter Suber commented at the time, “Harvard’s new OA policy is not the first university-level OA mandate, but it’s the first in the US, the first to be adopted by faculty rather than administrators, the first adopted

policy to focus on permissions rather than deposits, and the first to catch the worldwide attention of the press and blogosphere.”

What steps should academics be taking to further OA Movement discussions? Well, I think most are still unconvinced of the need for open access and/or decry the way in which it is being introduced. Consequently, the onus is on OA advocates to become far more effective at persuading their peers of the long-term value of open access. This would be much better than continuing to lobby funders and institutions to compel their peers to embrace OA in oppressive and/or ineffective ways. Importantly, rather than relying on publishers, OA advocates should be developing their own OA solutions. I say this because they need not only to demonstrate that open access is desirable and beneficial, but that it does not inevitably have to require researchers to negotiate increasingly complicated and bureaucratic self-archiving rules and procedures, or scramble around for hundreds, or thousands, of dollars every time they want to publish a paper.

So no, I do not think that enough people are focusing on OA right now. That is because too few have yet been convinced of the need for it, and many are turned off by the current models and approaches.

How far do you think we have come in advocating for OA in the time that you have been covering this movement? Do you think we are moving in any particular direction, why or why not?

RP: It is now nearly 15 years since I began reporting on open access. I think the first OA interview I did was with Stevan Harnad for the Financial Times in July 2001. In February the following year I reported for Information Today on the launch of the Budapest Open Access Initiative (BOAI) and the \$3 million grant that financier and philanthropist George Soros' Open Society Institute (OSI) had

just awarded to BOAI. I think the OA movement has made some key strategic errors, which I believe have significantly held back progress. However, the good news is that as the consequences of these errors are becoming increasingly apparent, we are seeing new approaches emerging, and often from the research community itself. Some of the new initiatives build on earlier ones. As you may know, physicists adopted open access as early as 1991, when they created the physics preprint server arXiv. The aim was to enable the sharing of research as soon as possible, and outside paywalls.

While arXiv was initially viewed as a place to post copies of papers before they are published in subscription journals, over time people have come to realise that it offers the potential to be much more. For instance, some now see it as a publication platform in its own right, and view the posting of papers on arXiv as a sufficient act of publication. Others see arXiv as a source of raw material for new style “overlay journals.”

Mathematicians and computer scientists have been leading the way with overlay journals, creating titles like SIGMA (Symmetry, Integrability and Geometry: Methods and Applications), Logical Methods in Computer Science, and the recently announced Discrete Analysis

(<http://discreteanalysisjournal.com/>). Importantly, these journals do not levy publication fees. As the SIGMA strapline puts it, “Free For Authors, Free For Readers”.

We can also see universities beginning to reinvent their institutional repositories as publishing platforms, both for journals and monographs. This is a route being taken by University College London for instance. Elsewhere, librarians and humanists are experimenting with alternative funding models. Last year, for example, a number of individuals and organisations got behind the Open Access Network. This envisages a more communal and

collective funding model for open access, one that would not require the payment of author-side fees.

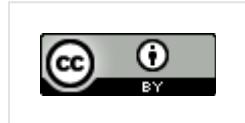
And we have seen the recent launch of the researcher-led Open Library of Humanities (<https://www.openlibhums.org/>) (OLH), which is funding itself by means of what it calls Library Partnership Subsidies. Libraries are important players in this space, and there is growing interest in library publishing initiatives like the Library Publishing Coalition (<http://www.librarypublishing.org/>), and the new OA publisher Amherst College Press (<https://acpress.amherst.edu/>).

Also of note has been the launch of the OA mega-journal Collabra (<http://collabra.org/>) and the OA monograph publisher Luminos (<http://www.luminosoa.org/>), both from the University of California Press. I would also highlight the work of Copernicus Publications (<http://publications.copernicus.org/>), which currently provides a platform for nearly forty OA journals, including Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics (ACP). What is notable about ACP is that it practices open peer review (or what it calls “interactive public peer review”). We are also seeing growing interest in post-publication peer review.

These new approaches are important because if open access is to achieve its full potential the whole publication process will need to be opened up and made more transparent and fair — if only in order to address the growing problem of predatory publishing. However, I think we need to view these new services and approaches as temporary way stations on a longer journey, not examples of how scholarly communication will look in the future.

To conclude: I believe open access is highly desirable, and inevitable, but it has taken a number of wrong turns. Before it can deliver on its promises, therefore,

it is going to have to redirect its efforts in a number of ways, and acknowledge that it is but one part of a larger revolution. It cannot hope to achieve its goal in isolation from that larger revolution.



[Creative Commons License](#)